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MEDIEVAL AND MODERN HISTORY IN THE HIGH SCHOOL¹

SINCE the report of the Madison Conference, history has been the storm-center of educational discussion. This center has at length moved from the field of American to that of European history. This topic is, therefore, a thoroughly life-question. Among the various contributions toward its solution, none is more weighty or valuable than the paper of Professor James Harvey Robinson, published in the Proceedings of the National Herbart Society. While narrower in scope than the epoch making report of the Madison Conference, it is more thorough, more conservative, and more conclusive. In innumerable respects it places every teacher of history and every friend of historical studies under lasting obligations. It is no small service that attention is focused upon the aim and content of historical instruction, to the exclusion of the interminable talk about methods. I would even hazard the suggestion, heretical though it be, that if more teachers would follow his example, in treating students "simply as men and brothers" rather than as psychological specimens, they would secure a response now denied even to the most scientific "methods." A further service is the tacit but none the less emphatic condemnation of the plan proposed by the Madison Conference and since widely recommended whereby general history is made an appendage to French or German history; a condemnation which has come none too soon to save the cause of historical study from lasting injury at the hands of its friends. Either medieval and modern history can be taught in high school, or it cannot. All the arguments urged for the substitution of French or German history amount to an assertion that it cannot. If this really be the case, let us frankly abandon the attempt to teach the history of modern civilization in high school; but in the name of historical fact and pedagogical

¹ Before the National Herbart Society, Chicago, July 1899, in discussion of Professor James Harvey Robinson's paper.

common sense, let us not pretend that this can be done "in connection with French or German history."

The list of defects in existing text-books of European history is not exhaustive—a volume would be required for that—but it includes the most fundamental. Such defects are: the cramming with meaningless names and dates, the emphasis on what is extraordinary and passing rather than on what is typical and permanent, the neglect of causal relations, the projection of latter day moral standards into the past, and the evident lack of scholarship on the part of the authors. Such an exposure of these faults cannot fail to make for their removal. This is especially true of the scourging administered to authors who presume to write texts for the schools without use of the sources or knowledge of books in foreign languages. If someone, speaking with equal authority, would only rise up and scourge the teachers who presume to teach history without a mastery of tongues and use of sources, the day of deserved discredit for history would quickly pass.

The outline of an ideal text-book will seem to the high-school teachers of history like a glimpse of the Promised Land to one weary and fainting in the desert. It is for precisely such a book that the better teachers of history have looked and longed these many years: a book which should be, not an *omnium gatherum* of things to be learned, nor yet of things to be admired or abhorred, but a clear and vigorous account of the salient factors and main stages in modern civilization, treating conditions more fully than persons or events, taking as its motto *Nur die Liebe hat Verständniss*, and leading to a comprehension of modern economic, social, and political institutions: in short, an institutional history based on Bernheim's definition: "Die Geschichte ist die Wissenschaft von der Entwicklung der Menschen in ihrer Bethätigung als sociale Wesen."

The list of topics to be included in such a book contains nothing that could be omitted. Some others might be added, such as the expansion of European civilization and control over the habitable earth. But the chief question which I would like to raise concerns more the order of prominence than the choice

of topics. In accordance with the idealistic tendency which Professor Sloane has declared to be dominant in contemporary historical thinking, the emphasis is laid throughout more on what men have thought than on what they have done. Without desiring to go to the other extreme and maintain the Marxian thesis, I cannot forbear to question the wisdom of this procedure, at least in a book intended for high-school use. Thus, for example, the contention regarding the importance of church history for an understanding of the Middle Ages is doubtless scientifically correct; but the study of theological dogmas in the high school does not seem to me likely to yield results at all commensurate with the time and energy consumed in the process. Moreover, teachers are not generally gifted with tact sufficient to tread the hot ashes of religious disputes without disaster, even supposing the author of the text able to steer his perilous way between Scylla and Charybdis. Finally, since our present interests necessarily determine the perspective of history, that topic should receive most extended treatment which is today of most vital, practical interest. Professor Robinson himself states this principle when he declared "Our interests have so changed that the older works do not contain what we ask, but neglect what to our age and generation seem the essentials." Judged by this criterion, what verdict would have to be passed upon a high-school text which should treat church matters so much in extenso? The burning question of today is the social question—the equitable organization of industry and of society: and any text which is to "contain what we ask" must lay emphasis throughout, not on the thoughts and beliefs of men, but on their economic and social condition. So far, therefore, from relegating economic topics to a subordinate position, I am firmly of the opinion, both on theoretical grounds and by reason of my experience as a teacher, that medieval and modern European history will never be rendered intelligible to high-school pupils until it is based on economic categories. To ignore, as is usually done, the development of the economic unit, the transition from a natural through a money to a credit economy, and the social and political effects of increasing division of labor, is to offer the play of Hamlet with Hamlet left out.

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